

# Mealtime Memo

## FOR CHILD CARE



2004

## Happy Mealtimes for Healthy Kids

A meal is a planned social interaction centering around food. When mealtimes are happy, everyone benefits.

Mealtimes in child care centers should reflect “best practices” in child care. Important child care goals surrounding mealtimes are to help children eat healthy meals today and develop positive eating habits that will last a lifetime.

At the child care center, key considerations are that children

- Have a pleasant mealtime atmosphere
- Practice appropriate mealtime behavior with little intervention
- Develop good eating habits
- Eat when they are hungry
- Stop when they are full
- Enjoy a variety of foods

An important “best practice” is to remember and implement the “Division of Responsibility in Feeding Children.”

### Division of Responsibility in Feeding Children

#### Adults are responsible for

- Setting regular times for meals and snacks
- Planning and preparing healthy meals and snacks
- Assuring that the children come to the table at meal and snack times
- Creating a pleasant mealtime environment

#### Children are responsible for

- Deciding which of the healthy foods offered they want to eat
- Deciding how much food they want to eat

### Why should regular times for meals and snacks be established?

Children have small stomachs and large energy needs. This means children need to eat smaller amounts and more frequently than adults. Experts tell us that children need to eat every two or three hours during the day. This often means a breakfast, morning snack, lunch, afternoon snack, dinner, and evening snack. If children become overly hungry they can be irritable, have a difficult time focusing on tasks, and act out in a variety of ways.

#### Adults Schedule Regular Meals and Snacks



Infants, however, should be fed “on demand.” That means infants should be fed whenever they show signs of being hungry. Even from birth, infants are very good at knowing when they are hungry and full. When they are hungry, they suck and suck; and when they are full, they close their little lips and do not eat any more. It’s great to watch infants eat and know they are very skilled at eating when they are hungry and that they stop eating when they are full.

Gradually, after about a year, toddlers can begin eating at more regular meal and snack times. It takes a little practice for toddlers to learn how much they need to eat at a meal or snack to last them until the next meal or snack. By the time a child is about two years of age, he or she can usually wait a short time for the next meal or snack. In other words, when two-year-olds tell you they are hungry, they are usually content if you tell them you’re making the snack and it will be ready in a few minutes. Offering meals and snacks at regular times means that children do not have to wait too long for a meal or snack.



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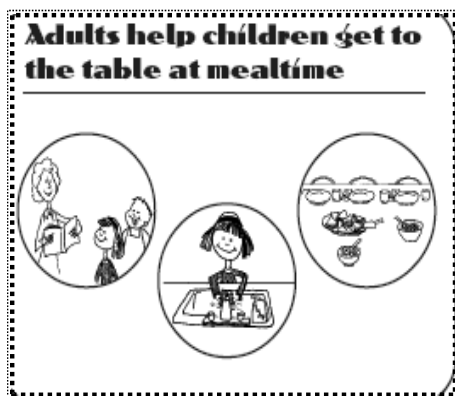
## How should healthy meals be planned and served?

Pay special attention to children's nutritional needs, color and texture of the food, ethnic considerations, and the goal of offering a variety of "easy-to-like foods" and "new foods" throughout the menu. Using cycle menus assures that children are offered meals that meet their nutritional needs and that new foods are introduced on a regular and repeated basis. When planning meals and snacks for children, adults should keep in mind the concept of "everyday foods" and "sometimes foods." By carefully planning meals and snacks, you can be assured that children are offered wholesome foods for meals and snacks. This makes it much easier to keep "sometime foods" like soft drinks, candy, and potato chips as occasional foods.

## Why should you encourage children to come to the table at meal and snack times?

Children can be very involved with their activities. Occasionally when you tell them it is "time for snack" or "time for lunch," they may be hesitant to stop what they are doing. A transition time between active play and mealtime can help children "slow down" enough to focus on the meal or snack and eating. Music time, story time, circle

time activities, or having the children help set the table or help with some food preparation activities often serves this purpose. Children may say they are not hungry for a meal or snack. You can assure them that if they



are not hungry they do not need to eat but they should join the table so they can participate in the conversation. Often children will change their minds and have something to eat once they are sitting with their friends and watching their friends and teachers enjoy a great meal or snack.

## What is a pleasant mealtime environment? How is it created?

A pleasant mealtime is a relaxed time to share food and conversation. When mealtimes are pleasant, you and the children will enjoy the meal more. Children are more likely to eat well when they are in a pleasant environment. Plan carefully and offer meals to children in a relaxed setting. A transition activity between active play and mealtime is a good time to remind children of what they can expect and what you expect during the meal. When children understand what will "happen next" and how they are expected to behave, they feel more comfortable and can relax during the meal. Suggested ideas include

- We will be having lunch together in a few minutes.
- Let's wash our hands and then we will sit down at the tables together.
- Remember to use our inside voices.

Another way to make mealtimes pleasant is to encourage child-directed conversation, focusing on the child's interests and experiences.

Encourage the children to talk more than the adults. The conversation at mealtimes does not need to be about the food, although occasionally the staff may want to draw the children's attention to the

food to encourage them to try a new food or to help them focus on eating. The mealtime conversation around food may include what kinds of foods are being offered, what color the foods are, how they are prepared, if the children eat these same foods at home, where the foods come from, and a variety of related topics. Conversation should not focus on which foods a child has chosen or how much a child has eaten. If the meal is about to end, you may want to ask the children if they have had enough to eat or remind children that the next meal or snack will be offered after nap or at a certain time. Children should not be rushed through their meal. Careful planning and experience will let you know how much time the children need to eat in a relaxed setting.



## Sources

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